

Historic Nevada State Hospital Cemetery

How Did We Get Here

The Nevada Insane Asylum opened its doors to 1481 Nevada citizens on July 1, 1882. The "poor unfortunates" arrived by train at 4:30 AM² from Stockton, California. Prior to their arrival at Reno, they were housed and cared for by Doctors Langdon and Clark at their Woodbridge asylum near Stockton. The patients were welcomed back to Nevada to a brand new facility, the pride of the State.

There were three deaths from the period July 1, 1882 through December 31, 1882. As reported by Dr. Alson Dawson, the first Asylum Superintendent, one of the deaths was from chronic Bright's disease, one from old age, and one from epilepsy.³

The first recorded burial at the Asylum was William Placeton, who died September 25, 1882. His grave site is listed as number one in the Asylum burial ledger.⁴ Entries were made in the ledger until the Nevada Legislature closed the cemeteries for further burials in 1949.⁵

Evidence has yet to be uncovered regarding the original decision for the location of the cemetery, however, Dr. George Thoma (Superintendent at the time), reported the following in the 1891-1892 Biennial Report: "At the opening of this Asylum a section of ground on the farm was reserved for a cemetery and some twelve bodies buried there before the present cemetery was chosen. The location of this first site was so peculiar [sic] situated that quite a large area of farm land was made useless. I had the bodies carefully taken up and removed to the Asylum cemetery and the land ploughed and properly cultivated."⁶

In the 1887 Biennial Report, Superintendent Simeon Bishop reported building a fence to enclose the burial plot and planting ornamental shrubs and flowers.⁷ Dr. George Thoma, who succeeded Dr. Bishop as superintendent in March of 1891, noted: "A substantial and neat fence surrounds the burial plot, and I have had the grounds properly cleared, the avenues laid out and the graves mounded up." Dr. Thoma also recommended the installation of a monument in the center of a plot and "small granite or marble tablets" with the name and age of the deceased.⁸ No evidence has been found as yet that his recommendations were ever enacted.

In the years following, information in the Biennial Reports regarding the cemetery is conspicuous by its absence. By that time, demands placed on resources by deterioration of the buildings and facilities and patient over-crowding had highest priority for appropriations from the Legislature. Dr. Sidney Tillum mentioned in the 1945-1946 Biennial Report: "The hospital cemetery has been the object of adverse criticism for many years. The recently approved new plot for a cemetery will be fenced and plotted as soon as materials are available. The new location will permit proper upkeep because of accessibility to water. The old cemetery will be fenced to guard against trespassing and defiling."⁹ While the new plot was established and used for burials, the fencing and upkeep is a subject for further research as to whether it actually happened or not. What is known is horrible atrocities have been associated with the remains of the interred over the years and what existed up until just 2009, was unrecognizable as a cemetery.

Fast forward to 2008 when a group of concerned citizens formed the organization Friends of Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services Cemetery to rectify some of the wrongs.¹⁰ Through their efforts a bill was sponsored by State Senator Mathews and Assemblywoman Smith for the 2009 Legislative Session that designated an area on the grounds of Northern Nevada Adult Mental Health Services as a historic cemetery (Senate Bill 256). The bill passed on May 16,

2009 and was signed by Governor Gibbons. Subsequently, the Division of Mental Health and Developmental Services has held a series of public workshops and hearings¹¹ for input and suggestions from the public. Plans are in the works for fencing and cleaning up the grounds where part of the cemetery is known to be. The playground equipment that was in Pinion Park has been removed. There are also discussions of placing a memorial. As the Friends say, "The current generation of hospital administrators and politicians were not responsible for the history of the cemetery. They do, however, find themselves in a position to make some amends by providing a new future for the residents of the cemetery and their families. We hope to work together to provide the hospital with constructive ideas and supplemental private funds to help restore the dignity and respect the people buried at this cemetery deserve."¹²

For an interesting treatment of this subject, please see: "NNAMHS Cemetery Planning Recommendations and Historic Context."

NNAMHS Cemetery Restoration IFC Presentation (2/2/2010)

For a site (just in its infancy) that proposes to produce a complete history of the "Insane Asylum," please see: <http://historicnevadastatehospital.org>.

- 1 Report of Superintendent 1882.
- 2 Daily Nevada State Journal, July 2, 1882.
- 3 Report of Superintendent 1882.
- 4 Burial Ledger, Nevada State Insane Asylum, Nevada State Library and Archives.
- 5 Survey of the Nevada Hospital For Mental Diseases, Bulletin No. 10, December 1950, p. 28.
- 6 Report of Superintendent 1893.
- 7 Report of Superintendent 1887.
- 8 Report of Superintendent 1893.
- 9 Report of Superintendent 1947.
- 10 Please see the Friends web site: <http://friendsofnorthernnevadaadultmentalhealthservicescemetery.com> .
- 11 See: Cemetery Workshop Minutes 11/25/2008, Cemetery Hearing Minutes 11/26/2008, Cemetery Workshop Minutes 10/22/2009, Cemetery Hearing Minutes 10/22/2009.
- 12 <http://friendsofnorthernnevadaadultmentalhealthservicescemetery.com/cemeteryhomepage.html>: accessed 2 February 2010.